

## The New Russian Book: A Graphic Cultural History

Birgitte Beck Pristed

This intriguing analysis of ‘the obtrusive but largely ignored problem of the visual representation of fiction in contemporary Russian book design’ is a contribution to Palgrave’s series *New Directions in Book History*, as well as to the fields of literary studies, visual studies, graphic design history and Eastern European Studies. Pristed’s exemplary interdisciplinary approach aims to explain the oxymoronic status of Russian book covers as being both eye-catching and overlooked. The first part presents what Pristed awkwardly terms a ‘graphical cultural history of fiction publishing in Russia’ – I couldn’t help wondering if the field of design history might not have been useful here. This part traces a shift from ‘a literature-centred Soviet book culture to a post-Soviet cultural industry’ in which the book is both ‘commodity of unregulated capitalism’ and ‘symbolic object of the collective cultural heritage’. For the first one hundred pages, Pristed discusses books largely in general terms, until chapter 5 when we turn to Chekhov and are shown our first book cover. Part two offers a formalised analysis of ways of representing ‘classic’ ‘popular’ and ‘contemporary’ literary works. The former is exemplified by Anton Chekhov’s short story “*Dama s sobachkoi*” (1899), the second by James Hadley Chase’s *The World in my Pocket* (1958) and the latter by Victor Pelevin’s *Generation “P”* (1999). These chapters are impressive for the way in which they treat the writers’ changing reputations alongside the representation of these selected works through book design. The final part of *The New Russian Book* addresses the ‘production side’ of book design through the work of three generationally, educationally and economically diverse practitioners: Arkadii Troianker, Andrei Bondarenko and Aleksandr Utkin.

The book is based on Pristed’s PhD from the University of Mainz (2014). Notwithstanding its clear contribution and engaging writing (with very few slips of idiomatic expression), the book retains aspects of the doctoral thesis: the introduction rehearses some basic functions for the book cover as façade or window between the world of the book and the world of the reader, positions the study in relation to a number of fields and methods, and carefully plots the study’s originality; the text is heavily referenced and offers a wealth of detail; and three parts each adopt a different approach in the manner of a researcher exploring new methods. Although Pristed is punctilious in making connections - between academic fields, between Soviet and Post-Soviet books, between the importance of design as a book selling tool in capitalist contexts and the Soviet view of books merely as a means of information dissemination, to be consumed principally in libraries, between geo-cultural regions, between highbrow and lowbrow literary culture, between graphic design and illustration, between hardback and paperback, etc. – more might have been done to develop an engaging and persuasive narrative to make the research compelling and more globally relevant. Pristed provides a table showing paperback and hardback publication from 1927 to 2003 and she makes much of the paperback revolution (a term she finds to be overused) in the west having a correlative hardback revolution in the USSR, but more could have been done to explain to readers why that matters. That is not to detract from Pristed’s excellent, innovative, contribution.

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